

A Comparison of Russian and Italian Honey Bees

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*American beekeepers have been using Italian honey bees (*Apis mellifera ligustica*) since they were first imported to the New World in 1859. The standard German honey bee (*A. m. mellifera*), which had been in America for more than 200 years, was by that time ill-tempered, disease-ridden, and less suited for honey bee management. Conversely, the Italian bees were and are excellent honey producers, show a gentle temperament that makes them the most popular race of honey bee in North America, have a moderately low tendency to swarm, and have a bright yellow color that makes queens easy to find.*

But Italian honey bees are susceptible to two deadly parasitic mites, the tracheal mite (*Acarapis woodi*) and the varroa mite (*Varroa destructor*), which were introduced into the U.S. in 1984 and 1987, respectively. Colonies contract these mites through equipment sharing and overcrowding, and, once infested, entire colonies can succumb within one or two years. Beekeepers have relied largely on pesticides to control the mites, but many of these

chemicals can contaminate the honey and beeswax in a hive. The mites also are becoming increasingly resistant to the pesticides, making the chemicals less reliable and, eventually, ineffective. The high colony mortality that accompanies these two mites is a serious concern of the bee industry today, and various types of bees are continually being examined with an eye toward finding a hardy, productive stock that can resist them.